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ESCHATOLOGY OF AI: ARTIFICIAL REVELATIONS BETWEEN ENCHANTMENT AND ENHANCEMENT

GENERICSCIENCE,
MASHINES

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According to the prophecies of cyber-priests like Elon Musk, humanity is on the brink of collapse: artificial intelligence will take over the world and seal the end of our precious civilization. The salvation? Technological solutions from people like Elon Musk, including AI, of course. A look at the history of apocalyptic narratives shows: Whenever alienation from the world shaped by almost untouchable powers is at its greatest, talk of the apocalypse functions as a panacea. It is therefore time to look in the mirror and emancipate ourselves politically, as Giorgi Vachnadze argues.

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Contemporary cybernetic discourses have given new life to the word 'eschatology,' which refers to expectations of the end of the present age, human history, or the world itself. As we all know, doomsday end-of-day scenarios populate all ancient religious as well as modern techno-scientific narratives. In most cases, an eschatology is also a 'soteriology': the promise of annihilation accompanied by the promise of rebirth and salvation in new forms. The destruction of the old world is typically followed by "a new normal."

"While transhumanists usually distance themselves from religion and reject any suggestion that their works are fictional, science fiction and ancient religious and philosophical ideas inevitably play a role when we discuss the future of AI in these terms" (Coeckelbergh, 2020). Robert Geraci (2010) in "Apocalyptic AI: Visions of Heaven in Robotics, Artificial Intelligence, and Virtual Reality" shows how an *Eschatology of Artificial Intelligence*, or what he himself terms "Apocalyptic AI," is used as one of the more powerful popular narratives for hyping up the industry and attracting corporate and government funding into AI research. Geraci explicitly refers to Apocalyptic AI as a religious ideology.

WORSHIP OF TECHNOLOGY

Apocalyptic AI is a narrative of techno-salvation. It comes both from AI experts as well as the technologically illiterate "masses." Robotics and Machine Learning are powerful political programs that aren't exclusive to pop-culture/science fiction references. Much more (or much less) than disenchantment, technology functions as one of the most sophisticated tools of dazzling mythological thinking. Simulation is the hyperreal that displaces or "enhances" reality. As Robert Geraci states: "Apocalyptic AI is a movement in popular science books that integrates the religious categories of Jewish and Christian apocalyptic traditions with scientific predictions based upon current technological developments. Ultimately, the promises of Apocalyptic AI are almost identical to those of Jewish and Christian apocalyptic traditions." The Christian ritual for the purification of one's body reemerges as an ethical imperative through modern technologies of self-improvement (Coeckelbergh, 2022). The contemporary purified body is a technologically enhanced body.

Geraci offers something similar to a Foucauldian Genealogy when he considers the historical dimension of the contemporary religious worship of technology. Technological thought has been imbued with religious connotations since its inception. The nineteenth century largely failed in the task of disentangling itself from mythology, for contemporary techno-scientific rationality remains largely religious in both its popular and academic dimensions. Again Geraci: "There were precious few natural philosophers (the word "scientist" was not coined until the nineteenth century) who did not integrate religious and scientific beliefs as they brought about the scientific revolution." From Francis Bacon to Robert Boyle and Isaac Newton, Geraci shows how many monumental figures in the history of Western science were religious not in the marginal, but in an *essential* sense. Meaning: their scientific work was directly related to their religious aspirations.

This is not surprising, since some of the earliest developments in technological science, including finite mechanical automata, took place in medieval Christian monasteries. They

served a purpose very similar to contemporary dreams of ideal health, posthuman security (Beer, 2022), and complete industrial automation: 'the restoration of man's divine state of being prior to the fall of Adam and Eve'. We could speculate about the existence of a theological unconscious that is rooted in computational thinking. We need only imagine Adam as a robotic superintelligence capable of thinking and acting according to effective procedures and programmable code. As Geraci reminds us: "Many natural philosophers believed that Adam possessed all scientific knowledge and sufficient powers of observation to understand all of creation. In order to overcome Adam's failure and restore humanity to prelapsarian grace (i.e., the grace before the fall), natural philosophers improved their powers and observations through technology."

INTENSIFICATION OF MYTHOLOGICAL THINKING

This view encapsulates a computational epistemology, which goes hand in hand with CTM (computational theory of mind), and of course a computational cosmology: the idea that the entire universe is a fully computable Turing machine. The theologic-machinic unconscious was carried into the Reformation and the scientific developments that took place in parallel with the establishment of the Protestant way of life. The secularization of Western reason was only an intensification of mythological thinking; it continued to operate on a level that was only hidden.

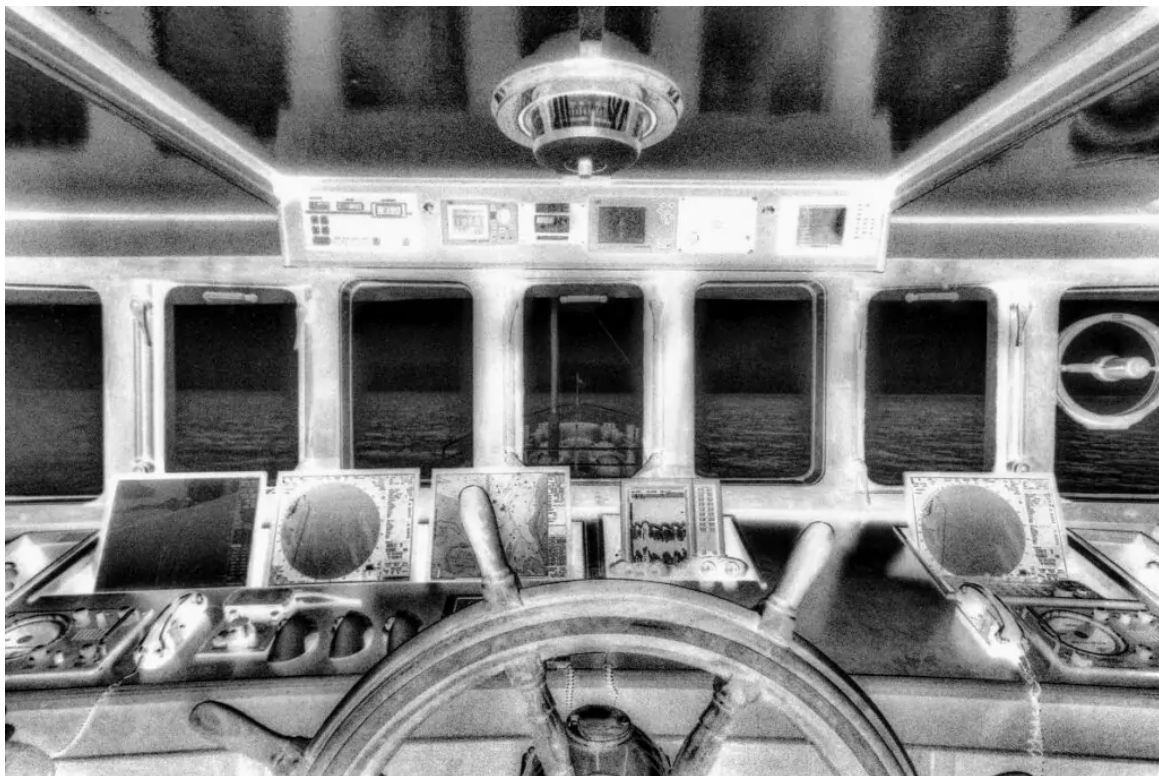


Image: Circuits, controls, and navigation equipment in the cockpit of a ship at sea. License: Public Domain.

It is here that Michel Foucault's warning concerning the governmentalization of centralized apparatuses remains as relevant as ever. The dissolution of a particular mode of governance, tradition, or institution does not signal the death of its discourse. On the contrary, the discourse is intensified because it is no longer contained within the demarcated sphere of practice, but spreads like a poisonous gas throughout the social body. In this sense, soteriological thinking remains immanent in techno-science. As Geraci puts it: "The devices

that modern human beings require (microscopes, telescopes, etc.) in order to understand the world, demonstrate humanity's fall but at the same time fulfill the religious obligation to make amends, to overcome sinfulness. At the same time, increased scientific and technological knowledge predicted a coming millennium of peace, a worldly progress that matched postmillenarian Biblical interpretation." Both Christianity and techno-science embody much more than either religion or technology, taken separately and popularly understood; their essence converges at one intersection: their common allegiance to sacred political technologies. For example, your iPhone.

AN ALL-PURPOSE POLITICAL TECHNOLOGY

Cyberspaces can create metaphysical spaces, constrained only by the laws of logic. Freed from the fetters of natural physics, one could design levitating temples, upside-down cathedrals, and moving monasteries. The virtual church can create stronger feelings of euphoria and transcendence. The digital priest will replace the analogue preacher. Transhumanism is the direct effect of technological *enchantment*. One need not even take things so literally. The smartphone, in all of its hyper-functional simplicity in UX Design, remains just as much a religious artifact as any other. In some sense, the computer screen is far more stimulating than the interior of a Grand Cathedral; it directly performs the task of capturing subjectivity, whereas the latter does so only indirectly. Digital devices are *interactive* miracles, whereas icons are only *representations* of the divine.

Political struggles intensified eschatological narratives. Both the elite priestly castes and minority groups of Jewish and Christian sects (under Roman rule), both those who wielded power and those who were deprived of freedom, held great soteriological hopes for the end times. Eschatological prophecies functioned as sacred objects of powerful libidinal investment. Apocalypse operated as an all-purpose political technology. It functioned as more than just a simulacrum; it was a 'Swiss-Army-knife-Dispositif' that could be used as a reservoir of resentment for the vanquished, a legitimizing strategy for maintaining the power of the ruling elite, and a justification for revolt for the oppressed.

Whether it was the insatiable greed of the victors, the docility of the fallen or the militant resistance of those who refused to be governed, visions of apocalypse acted as the intoxicating element used to counteract alienation. The persuasive force of soteriological stories would accumulate with the increase in frustrated desires and disappointments. For both action and inaction, activity and passivity, obedience and struggle; apocalypse was easily mobilized as a tool for "communication and control" i.e., *kybernētēs* (κυβερνήτης), the etymological root of the word Cybernetics, translates as "those who steer or govern." Geraci states: "The more deeply the believer feels his or her immersion in evil, the more he or she will anticipate the arrival of a solution. Alienation accelerates eschatology; it provides an impetus for the end of the world." To repeat, alienation could emerge out of a diversity of failed lifestyles; it can spread within every social class and take root through a multiplicity of disappointed anticipations. Hence the effectiveness of apocalypse as a political tool of subjection and subjectivation.

"ALIENATION ACCELERATES ESCHATOLOGY"

Revelation serves to fill the symbolic gap between the ideal and the perceived self. The subject compensates for its internal fragmentation by constructing a holistic/holy image of the future in which there are no traces of the real, the flawed, and therefore the evil. Computational models operate in a similar fashion. Despite their failure to enclose and complete the world through formal-mathematical models, we keep hearing the same mantra, repeated as a prayer: that it is only a matter of computational power, technical resources, or the current state of research that stands between us and heavenly cyberspaces with enhanced robotic bodies. The New Israel will be fully automated! Science has increasingly begun to imitate its mythological rival. Is this a sign of the world's downfall? Or just the end of modern science? Today, we hear more and more about "faith" or "belief" in science instead of the more urgent and immediate need for an analysis of the political economy, social inequality, and digital governance practices that surround it and seem to demand of us the aforementioned unquestioning faith in the prophecies of cyber-priests like Elon Musk.

Judeo-Christian eschatologies of resurrection are *embodied*. This bears an uncanny affinity to Transhumanist Techno-Gnostic sentiments. To quote Geraci again: "Their earthly bodies, tainted as they were by the dualistic world that they inhabited, would not be appropriate in heaven. Instead, resurrected bodies would be new and glorious. God would raise up the dead in purified bodies; made immortal, these glorious new bodies would enable the righteous to join the angels in the Kingdom of God". The machinic body is an efficient body, now sacralized through market value and the worship of the generic money-form, which, algorithmically transposed, turns into Facebook likes, reactions, tweets, reposts, and other monetizable online click-through activities. The digital heaven is either pure virtuality, where (uploaded) consciousness can participate in the community of disembodied (fiat) monads, or a robotic, refurbished body, more akin to the bodily resurrection found in Christian scriptures. Or, still further, the disciplined body of the consumer awaiting its computational dissolution, often to be disappointed, as it ends up on the losing end.

Artificial revelations predict the transformation of earthly bodies into *celestial* bodies. The history of Western thought is scattered with multiple similitudes and identifications of machinic calculation with thinking and transcendence. Each of the signifiers – heavenly beings, angels, machines, reason, thought, atoms, etc. – is rearticulated in one way or another within the overall symbolism of accuracy, purity, rigor, and divine physical and ethical perfection. These are the pictures (Wittgenstein, 2021) that to a large extent constitute the theological unconscious of scientific rationality and the Western subject's relation to the truth. Especially as we see it (only slightly) transformed under the neoliberal regime of monetizable statements, market-driven "facts" and the worship of one-dimensional representations of success-as-truth. The artificial kingdom is therefore not only a carnal resurrection embodied in the perfection of body and mind, but it includes a world of luxury and extravagance, pleasure and jouissance, the abolition of poverty and a fully automated cybersociality. By abolishing human duality, an algorithmic rebirth will crown the soteriology of AI by "reinstalling" the primordial divine unity that humanity experienced before the Fall... Good luck?

Note from the editors: This article is a contribution to the BG's "Politics of Apocalypse" dossier. More content on these topics can be found here: <https://berlinergazette.de/>

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